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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how teachers can remain in the teaching profession when they are told to implement directives over which they have little control and into which they have had little or no input, typically being the last to be consulted regarding educational change and reform. It suggests that teachers must recreate education and reclaim the classroom in the face of anyone who will try to shape the classroom and teacher discourse with students. The paper explains that the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) is more important now than ever because it unites teachers' voices and supports them in their efforts. It describes the NCTE and its history, focusing on what the NCTE stands for (writing, literature, integrated language arts, diversity, knowledgeable and caring teachers, advocacy, and public education). Finally, it examines the future and NCTE, explaining NCTE's role in helping to recreate the classroom. NCTE is a place where teachers can share what they know about teaching and learning, a professional home, and a place that believes that teaching is a marriage of the soul and the mind. (SM)

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Recreating the Classroom

Presidential Address

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91st Annual Convention

National Council of Teachers of English

November 2001

Baltimore

I have been a teacher for almost 30 years, and one of the things that makes such longevity joyful is the company of other teachers. Through the years I have made friends with and been helped by a wide array of people who have intervened in my teaching life (and by extension, in my personal life) and offered me support and inspiration. It was, then, with some surprise that one of those very teachers, a longtime friend with a vibrant personality, known for her wit and hard work and positive attitude, wanted to talk with me about leaving teaching. So at a recent NCTE convention, sitting near the exhibit hall, we found some time to sit down together. We drank Diet Cokes, and she told me her reasons. I had known my friend as a high school teacher, during her doctoral work, and now, as a professor of English education. She got along well with her students and her colleagues, and she had a strong reputation in the classroom.

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But that was not enough. Recent events in education, both at the state and national level, had been the final breaking point, had left her discouraged, at odds, overwhelmed. An active member of our state affiliate, she and others had worked for some years to craft reasonable state standards and responsible tests. As with many such endeavors, as in many states which have created standards and accompanying assessments, little of her work was evident in the final, official plan. Further, she was informed that the assessments, which were now assigned the highest cut-off scores possible, would be used in a way neither she nor her teaching colleagues had ever imagined: the results of the tests would determine school accreditation, principal and teacher assignments, student retention and remediation. My friend felt that her experience was emblematic: we in teaching have continued to lose control of the public agenda and find, to our dismay, that while every politician and bureaucrat puts education on the agenda, top of the list, first rank, teachers are rarely consulted about what happens with that education agenda. Policy is drafted, money is appropriated, and at the end of the process we are *told* what to do within our classrooms.

There was, actually, not much of a rebuttal I could make to my friend: I agreed with almost all of what she discussed, and I wished her well in her new career. But I also knew that *I* was not leaving teaching and wondered later how, if I agreed with everything she had said— and I did— how was I, how were any of us teachers, planning to go on?

My friend's situation moved me and made me reflect on how any of us, veteran of 30 years, veteran of three, can continue to work every day when, here and now, we feel under siege and discouraged? How can we continue when we are told to implement directives over which we have little control and into which we have had little or no input? And this year it is as challenging as ever: these are perilous times for education and for teachers and for students. While we know our classrooms do not exist in a vacuum, that

they are not some isolated unit of four walls and a closed door, it seems that we teachers are, once again, the last to be consulted regarding educational change and reform. We know classrooms and schools and universities exist in a culture and a context and a community and that we as educators are profoundly responsible to those communities. Yet it seems we the teachers are rarely brought into the discussion process. Surely none of us presumes to interpret the IRS Code for our accountants; few of us would argue with our radiologist about the reading of an x-ray. But when it comes to education, everyone is an expert and we, teachers and professors, are seen as folks with special interests, people who are not-to-be-trusted “educationists.” We are often the one constituency whose advice *does not matter*.

In the face of this, how do we keep going? Eastern religion, in *The Bhagavad-Gita* in particular, counsels that we be concerned with action, not the fruit of action (95-98). In the Christian *New Testament*, the apostle St. Paul writes very similarly of the virtue of just going on: the language he uses is fighting the good fight, running the race, keeping the faith (2 Timothy, 4:7). In the *Four Quartets*, the English poet T.S. Eliot is blunt: “For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business” (128).

And despite our occasional discouragement, we do keep on trying. And I think what keeps us staying the course is that those of us who continue to teach have a vision that sustains us.

Our Vision

Our vision is of a classroom as it should be—it is Hemingway’s clean, well-lighted space, a classroom which, kindergarten through doctoral level, is where students find a place for reading, for writing, for talking, for thinking out loud. In that classroom students are taken seriously—even lovingly—by well prepared, intelligent, and intellectually

curious teachers.

In that classroom skills are taught--but never to the exclusion of creative activities and spontaneous discussions. Tests are given--but they come directly from what has been taught and what has been learned. In that classroom tests contain all sorts of different and appropriate assessment items, and the tests are used to improve student learning and mastery. The tests, essentially, are used to encourage students, not used to rank and sort and alienate or humiliate. In that classroom reading is approached in multiple ways, depending not on a political agenda but on the student's developmental needs and the teacher's professional assessment of those needs. Literature in this classroom uses whole texts and includes classics but also embraces the very contemporary. Some of the literature in this classroom showcases characters and situations and settings and dialogue which are familiar to the students and reflect their home communities; this is literature which is so accessible that it doesn't always require extensive background lectures or textual footnotes.

In this classroom teachers teach first to students, second for curriculum mastery, and a distant third for test scores. In this classroom, activities are authentic, not just school-based busywork. In this classroom, all language has a place, all experience is welcomed. And, at the end of the day, when students leave this classroom, they want to come back and continue to read and write and make language.

This is our vision of the classroom, the classroom we must recreate, reclaim as it were, in the face of those who might determine and legislate something which is narrower and more restrictive and which fits their view of appropriate education. We have to reclaim the classroom in the face of Democrats and Republicans, in the face of liberals and conservatives, in the face of religious right and non religious alike, in the face of anyone

who will dictate to us, use legislation and funding, loss of accreditation and other punitive measures or threats, how to shape our classrooms and our discourse with our students. While we acknowledge that these people are often well meaning, sometimes they are not. And most times they are so distant from our schools and our students that their policies have far more to do with partisan ideology than with the reality of teaching and learning. While it is often hard to determine who is our friend and who is not in this business, we must look critically at what others outside the classroom advocate for the good for our students and our schools and universities. Then we must make our professional choices, choices which are based on our earned authority, our teaching experience, and choices which are based upon sound research and what we know of best practice. And we have that right.

I have always believed in the primacy of the teacher, in the fact that the teacher, who logs more time in the classroom than any local or national politician, than any administrator or school superintendent, than any dean or university president, that that teacher is the expert and the professional. He or she knows English language arts, knows students, and knows the institution in which he or she works. I don't accept stories about the widespread presence in our schools and colleges of lazy and incompetent and uncaring teachers: the teachers I know— kindergarten through university— are thoughtful, conscientious, hardworking people. They are the members of my community, and I am proud to be one of them. As teachers, then, we must recreate, reclaim our authority in the classroom: the classroom is ours, our province, our field of endeavor, and I know for us that that work, that reclaiming, is wholly in service not of our egos or of our professional advancement but in the service of our common treasure, our students.

And this is something I think we need to make a concerted effort to tell our

parents and the public. While it is simply not possible for many of us to directly refuse school district or university mandates, to resign from our teaching positions, to put, as it were, our lives and careers and finances at stake, if what we are told to do in our classrooms contradicts what we know is best for students, we must take action. I think all of us need to remember that we have a civic, yes, a moral responsibility, to inquire, to question, and, at times, to challenge what is going on around us in the name of education and educational reform.

It is not the national directive, the local curriculum guide, the standards, state or national; it is not the expertise of the administration, the funding of the school district, or even parental support. The foundation, the bedrock, the basis of any change or improvement in education in this country is the individual teacher in the individual classroom, working in service of our students' learning.

The Need for NCTE

This is why we need a National Council of Teachers of English, now more than ever. When we unite our voices, our strength, at this moment in history our 70,000 members, 70,000 K-university teachers, we have a better chance to speak with a loud and clear voice and to recreate our classrooms, to call into question what is currently passing in education as received wisdom. Through our organization we have a better chance to share our vision with the wider world. To that extent, there is strength in numbers; to that extent, size is power.

We need a National Council of Teachers of English to continue to do what it has been doing and, with your support, will continue to do for years to come. The National Council of Teachers of English provides a voice, a focal point, a gathering place, a resource: your NCTE has a staff of almost 100 professionals who work with members to

provide the information and the communication which all of us need and which all of us struggle to maintain. Some of those communication tools are print, in NCTE books, journals and newsletters. Some are electronic, through our web page, the many NCTE listservs, and ongoing email communications to members. Some of our networking comes through workshops, seminars, and conventions held at the state and the national levels. NCTE is also an organization which encourages excellence through the recognition of student writing, school literary magazines, and school newspapers, through the recognition of promising dissertations and cutting-edge research in English education. Through a variety of programs, NCTE fosters the work of early career teachers, urban teachers, teachers of color, gay, lesbian, and bisexual teachers.

NCTE also has elected officers, a team of four individuals who are, in their years of service, almost wholly focused on the work of the National Council of Teachers of English. We have commissions, committees, affiliates, special interest groups. NCTE funds teacher research, and we foster teacher leadership at all levels. We provide information and support to teachers and librarians when books are challenged and threatened with censorship. We publish and disseminate resolutions and position statements, we monitor legislation, we meet with policy makers. We are politically aware—and within the limits of our territory as a non-profit professional organization--we are and must be politically active. Although some members are uncomfortable with this fact, it is, essentially, consistent with our mission and with the history of the National Council of Teachers of English.

How NCTE Came About

I invite you back to the Great Northern Hotel on Michigan Avenue in Chicago. It is December, the day after Thanksgiving, and it is 1911. There are gathered there 65

individuals— men and women— from eleven states. They are determined people and are spending their holiday break planning a small revolt. Their cause is opposition to a large and powerful cartel, led by the richest and most influential of the universities in this country. This cartel is determining the literature curriculum in the schools in which this group of educators work and the nature of the testing on that literature. The situation is not acceptable, not so much because of turf issues but because of its almost total disregard for the expertise of the teachers and, more importantly, for the needs of the students. Led by the energetic, charismatic James Fleming Hoscic, the band of 65 joins to create an organization, take a stand, and launch a journal. The group calls itself the National Council of Teachers of English. The magazine they start is *English Journal*, and its first issue appears just one month after the December meeting (Hook, 3-28; Applebee 45-54).

Today we are their descendents, their inheritors, and the direct stewards of the organization they founded. It is anthropomorphic and romantic perhaps to invest in an organization and a journal the attributes of humanity. But as I found when I was editor of *English Journal*, the magazine was for me a living thing. And as president of the National Council of Teachers of English, I find myself in a similar position. I and my fellow and sister NCTE members are the present and the future of what that brave band in 1911 envisioned. It is a trust.

We are, however, in very different times. Around 1911 it seems, in retrospect, the educational world was on fire. This was the time for studies and statements that changed education profoundly: John Dewey and the Progressive Movement were on the horizon, and a number of important statements about education had been or were ready to be published. In this era was published the work of the Committee of Ten (1894), James Fleming Hoscic's own work on the Reorganization of English in Secondary Schools (1917),

and the Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education (1918). By contrast, in the past twenty years, we have enjoyed few such ground-breaking educational studies: the dismal *A Nation at Risk* (1983), predicting the disintegration of public education, is our closest comparison. As for professional organizations, times have also changed. We are not seeing the tremendous interest in educational organizations we saw in the early twentieth century but just the opposite.

Professional Organizations Today

Today we face a different world. All professional organizations--and this includes the American Medical Association, the American Bar Association as well as traditional civic groups such as Rotary, Kiwanis and even religiously affiliated organizations such as Hadassah and Knights of Columbus—are in membership decline. We are in an age where people do not turn to large organizations for answers or for community. We are in an era when it is not automatically assumed that joining a professional organization is important, necessary, or even helpful. The sociological study, *Bowling Alone*, describes organizations such as NCTE, “[l]arge groups with local chapters, long histories, multiple objectives, and diverse constituencies” (184). In NCTE these attributes were never insurmountable obstacles although, at times, gaining consensus could be challenging. But, more to the point, *Bowling Alone* maintains that organizations such as NCTE are currently “being replaced by more evanescent, single-purpose organizations, smaller groups that ‘reflect the fluidity of our lives by allowing us to bond easily but to break our attachments with equivalent ease’” (184).

Bowling Alone tells the story of many kinds of organizations, but much of its insight is pertinent to the National Council of Teachers of English. Like many organizations, we have experienced a very steady decline in membership. Here, at the true beginning of the

millennium, we must, like our forebears at the Great Northern Hotel, articulate our vision, realize our determination, and plan our strategies. We must continue to keep current members and to attract new ones: without that kind of strength in numbers, we will not be effective in advocating for students and our classrooms, in articulating to the public what we stand for and what our vision may be.

What We Stand For

And what, in the National Council of Teachers of English, do we stand for? We have a set of core values, which includes:

Writing: we believe that writing is a “central tool for learning, thinking, communication,” and we advocate not only its educational value but its use in evaluation and assessment;

Literature: we believe in the “distinctive power of literature to reawaken the imagination,” and we acknowledge the power of literature in instruction;

Integrated language arts: we hold that literacy includes “reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and media study” and that an integrated language curriculum is the path to a “literate life”;

Diversity: we advocate the classroom as a “unique place to develop voice as well as to respect and to hear all voices.” This includes difference as a value “in pursuit of an education befitting a democracy” and a willingness to “question and critique dominant and often assumed societal stances”;

Knowledgeable, caring teachers: we maintain that “the key to good education is having knowledgeable teachers in every classroom who understand and care about students, language, learning, teaching, and curriculum”;

Advocacy: through NCTE we “collectively and individually influence educational

policy and legislation so that it is based upon what is known about language and learning”; and

Public education: we “support inclusive, public education run in such a way that teachers can teach and students can learn... [we are] constantly interested in improving public education and in helping teachers in difficult teaching situations” (NCTE, 1999).

And I would like to add two more.

First, and always the most important, we stand for our **students**. And that means we stand for *all* our students, not just the ones who are good in school, who love reading, who make high grades in our classes; not just the ones who will write amazing poetry and gripping plays and elegant essays and who will go on to academic or professional glory. We also stand for other students, the students who come to us with English as a second language, who come to us without breakfast, who come to us tired because they are working two and three jobs so they can make tuition payments and stay in college, who come to us fearful of school and fearful of our classes. We stand for these students, for their learning, and for their humane and just treatment within our institutions of learning. We love our subject, but first and foremost, we stand for our students. Todd DeStigter expresses it well in *Reflections of a Citizen Teacher: Literacy, Democracy, and the Forgotten Students of Addison High*:

In my view, this sense of urgency, this keenly felt desire to do some good in this world, may serve as a prompt for citizen teachers to adopt an expanded notion of their work, especially when that work takes place in contexts where students represent a diversity of cultures and languages. That is, teachers must cultivate an identity not just as instructors of academic content or even as activists dedicated to promoting democracy. Rather, citizen teachers must also think of themselves as

social scientists striving to be more attuned to how their students view the world and how their culturally situated values shape the ways they think and live... For I have come to believe that in order to change the world for the better, our actions should begin and end face-to-face, *cara-a-cara*, with others. In communities such as these, people could no longer be forgotten (301-302,324) .

To my mind, our advocacy for our students is what gives us great strength and great heart. This is the source of our power: and when we fear we are overstepping our bounds, pushing too hard, we must remember that what we are doing is in service of not ourselves, but of our students. This is our north star.

And along with students we also stand for our **classrooms** and what happens in them. We are teachers, dare we say it— we are the experts— and we stand for our right to participate fully in educational decisions which affect our classrooms. We stand for our right to determine curriculum, select literature, shape methodology, create our own tests, and assess the students with whom we— not others— spend hours and hours each semester. We believe that our classrooms are rich places for language, and we insist on our right to recreate and shape those classrooms.

The Future and NCTE

What do we need to do?

We need not only to consider seriously why we are here as members of NCTE but what we want this organization to do in the future.

We are the place where resolutions and position statements are born and disseminated: what kinds of resolutions will the next 10 years call for?

We are the gathering point for tens of thousands of committed teachers: what are the needs of those teachers in today's and tomorrow's classrooms?

We are the publisher and distributor of thoughtful, well researched materials for teaching: what directions should those materials take?

We are knowledge givers and knowledge makers; we are, more importantly, the guardians of our students and the stewards of our classrooms. How, in the future, will we speak for English teachers and their students?

Whatever route we take—and there are many we can consider—we must be responsive and we must *be there*, at the policy table. We may not win every battle, craft every assessment, be consulted on all curricula, get every piece of legislation altered, or significantly influence the general mindset of the culture about school and English language arts. But if this organization, this NCTE, withers and dies, if we do not continue to meet today's challenges, to keep trying, we know that a powerful and long-standing advocate for students and for English classrooms will be lost.

What happens if there is no National Council of Teachers of English? What happens if the organization, like a star that has burned brightly, simply disappears in the firmament? I can't believe that all good teaching and learning will instantly cease in the English classrooms of this country. As partisan as I am, I know that if the National Council of Teachers of English falters, it will not be a worldwide catastrophe. But something important and singular will indeed be lost, a focal point, touchstone, a history, a way for teachers to communicate, share research and practice, and, together, to stand for what we know is true and important in the classroom.

Recreating the Classroom

NCTE is the place we can share what we know about teaching and learning, what we know about writing and listening and speaking and reading. NCTE is a professional home, and it is, also, for many of us, a personal home. In NCTE we believe that teaching

is a marriage of soul and mind, that the classroom is an ongoing event of discovery, passion, and a very real joy. While not every day, every class is wonderful—for there is occasional disappointment in this business for all of us—it is a consuming and deeply satisfying profession.

Here in NCTE we know that teaching is some of the most important work in the world; it transcends the concept of job or even career or profession into the sphere of *vocation*—as that word is used in a sense of being called, being chosen for a life role. It is expressed well by the science teacher Christa McAuliffe, who with others died tragically in the 1986 *Challenger* space disaster, and who has been widely quoted in what is bordering on becoming a cliché. McAuliffe's statement, "I touch the future. I teach," is to the heart of the matter for many of us who remain in the classroom. While no one will insist that it should be true for all teachers, it's true for many teachers, it's why most of us stay in the classroom and continue to stay the course and fight the good fight.

In an essay appropriately called "Teacher," the writer John Barth once observed that he was a teacher, he was a teacher to the extent where he could say, "There is chalk dust on the sleeve of my soul." Barth's comment is intimate, profound, and serious. It is part of what we are as English language arts teachers and as members of NCTE. As teachers, we continue, and we recreate our classrooms. Together, we can shape English language arts. Together, we can offer each other support, information, and power. Together, we can explain to our public what it is we do in our classrooms and why that is important, how it liberates our students and provides them space and voice and genuine language education. Together, we'll not win every fight every day, we'll not convince everyone every time, but when we speak with a united voice we can and do effect change. Together, in NCTE, we recreate the classroom.

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